

Principal Assessor Report 2005

Assessment Panel:

History

Qualification area

**Subject(s) and Level(s)
Included in this report**

History (Higher)

Statistical information: update

Number of resulted entries in 2004	7,885
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Number of resulted entries in 2005	8,120
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General comments re resulted entry numbers

Entries in Higher History remain buoyant, with numbers rising again to over 8,000. This is strong evidence of a continued healthy interest in the subject.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark- 110	-	-	-	-
A	19.3	19.3	1,564	71
B	30.6	49.9	2,484	61
C	26.7	76.5	2,166	52
D	8.8	85.3	715	47
No award	14.7	100.0	1,191	-

General commentary on passmarks and grade boundaries

- While SQA aims to set examinations and create mark schemes which will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum 50% of the available marks (notional passmark) and a very well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70%, it is almost impossible to get the standard absolutely on target every year, in every subject and level
- Each year we therefore hold a passmark meeting for each subject at each level where we bring together all the information available (statistical and judgmental). The Principal Assessor and SQA Qualifications Manager meet with the relevant SQA Business Manager and Statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. The meetings are chaired by members of the senior management team at SQA
- We adjust the passmark downwards if there is evidence that we have set a slightly more demanding exam than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance
- We adjust the passmark upwards if there is evidence that we have set a slightly less demanding exam than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance
- Where the standard appears to be very similar to previous years, we maintain similar grade boundaries
- An exam paper at a particular level in a subject in one year tends to have a marginally different set of grade boundaries from exam papers in that subject at that level in other years. This is because the particular questions are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. And just because SQA has altered a boundary in a particular year in say Higher Chemistry does not mean that centres should necessarily alter boundaries in their prelim exam in Higher Chemistry. The two are not that closely related as they do not contain identical questions
- Our main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

Comments on any significant changes in distribution of awards/grade boundaries

The grade boundaries for Upper A and A were reduced by 1, while that for band C was increased by 1. These changes reflected several issues:

- Unexpected issues with the accessibility of two sources in the most popular Special Topic in Paper 2, which affected in particular the performances of some candidates who scored well in other questions. These two factors contributed to the adjustments to the cut-off scores for A and Upper A.
- The misinterpretation by some candidates of three questions in Paper 1, although markers and teachers/lecturers in their feedback agreed that these questions were accessible and should not have been misinterpreted. This affected the performance of some borderline candidates, so contributed to decline in the overall (A – C) pass rate.

- The paper had been designed to be accessible to all candidates and Paper 1 in particular; as this was judged to be more accessible to all candidates, the a priori mark was raised at the C pass level by one mark.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

The general performance was slightly better to that in 2004, as reflected in the fact that at pass mark stage the mean scores in all three elements were higher than last year, with a marginal increase in Paper 1, though remaining significantly below the scores attained in 2002 and 2003, and larger rises in Paper 2, where the mean was restored to that of 2003 (16.1 out of 30), and in the Extended Essay, where it reached the highest level to date at 18.4 out of 30. At least in part this may have been due to a reduction in the number of candidates who would have been better served by entry for Intermediate 2, though some markers also reported seeing a larger number of very good scripts. It was pleasing that the examining team was able to show markers examples, both in Paper 1 and in the Extended Essay, of essays worthy of the award of full marks.

The description most commonly used by markers in respect of Paper 1 was “competent”, with most essays having an appropriate structure. There were, however, serious concerns about the number of candidates who, in respect of certain questions, ignored the question set to provide an answer to the question they wanted to be asked (see below – areas where candidates had difficulty). Paper 1 remains the element of the examination with the greatest potential for improvement in candidate performance. The single change in behaviour that would have the biggest influence in this direction would be for candidates to read the question carefully and ensure that their essays answer the question asked, not the one they would have liked to be asked.

Despite some issues with questions in Special Topic 7 that did not work as well as expected, the standard of performance was better than in 2004, with markers reporting in particular a reduction in the numbers of very weak scripts.

The best area of performance continues to be the Extended Essay, where the standard is now very high, with some exceptional pieces of work being noted.

Entry patterns remained familiar, with the majority of candidates being presented for Later Modern History. Within that Option, it appears that a few more centres are entering candidates for Historical Study: The Large Scale State, especially the USA, and also for Special Topic 8: The Origins and Development of the Cold War, but these may be impressions resulting from the random allocation of scripts to the examining team.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Paper 1

Once again, there was evidence of sound teaching and learning in terms of the historical content of answers. Where candidates addressed the terms of the question, evidence was, in the main, accurate and relevant.

In general, essay structures were also appropriate, with recognisable introductions and conclusions, even if these could often have been stronger. Some markers also noted that better answers often contained reference to historical debate.

In terms of subject areas, there were some excellent scripts in Option A: Medieval History. In Later Modern History there were generally good responses to question 5 on the Labour social reforms, question 9 on the rise of Nazism in Germany and generally on the Large Scale State: USA. Many responses to question 3 on the role of the Suffragettes in gaining votes for women were competent, but relatively few showed the analytical qualities required for the higher ranges of marks.

Paper 2

The overall response to the paper was encouraging, with markers reporting fewer very weak scripts than in the past. Once more, there was evidence of solid work in preparation, resulting in good source handling skills, with better answers using source evaluation to inform genuine historical analysis of the underlying issue. Some markers were positive about the use of recall to support source evaluations, though others were less convinced.

Performances were generally good in Special Topics 2 and 8, and markers noted continuing strength in responses across topics to the 8 mark questions requiring reference to three sources. In Special Topic 7, question 1 was answered very well and some very good responses were noted to question 5 among candidates who had a good understanding of what the policy of appeasement was trying to achieve.

Markers' views were mixed on the response to question 2 in Special Topic 7, some reporting that it was answered well, while others felt that borderline candidates had struggled to find sufficient detail in Source A to support the comparison with Source B.

Extended Essay

Markers were almost unanimous about the excellent work being demonstrated in the Extended Essay in centres all over Scotland. Many reported a continued rise in the quality of work, with more very good scripts being seen than in previous years. It is plain that this element of the examination really does allow candidates to demonstrate their best work, and that the best is often exceptional.

In the 2005 examination, almost all essays were well planned and well structured. The knowledge and understanding of the historical content was impressive, reflecting hard work and careful preparation. There was more evidence than previously of essays with good analytical qualities, with many showing familiarity with historical debate. Some candidates were able to use quotations from historians or even from primary sources very effectively to support a point or develop a line of argument. The corollary of this was that there were fewer examples of purely narrative or descriptive approaches.

Markers reported some excellent essays on Medieval History, including some first class work on David I of Scotland, and on various aspects of the growth of German nationalism, including some more sophisticated responses on the Nazi regime in Germany than in previous years.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Paper 1

Although there was an issue arising from this year's examination i.e. the absence of a question specific to Scotland in Option C, Historical Study: Scotland and Britain 1850s - 1979, that was not the factor that resulted in poor performances by a significant number of candidates. Marker after marker referred to the fairness of this paper:

“The paper set was fair and gave a wide choice.”

“A very good paper, allowing all pupils to do their best.”

“Later Modern section was accessible to all candidates who had studied the course carefully.”

“There was little to get confused about from the questions.”

Despite this, a significant number of candidates (in some cases most from particular centres) chose to ignore the phrasing of the question and write the essay they had prepared in advance. This was especially noticeable in Later Modern History, questions 1 and 2.

In question 1, which asked for reasons for the extension of the franchise, many candidates, plainly anticipating a question on the extent to which Britain had become a democracy by the early twentieth century, gave the set answer, “Parliament extended the vote to increasing numbers of people because it passed many Acts”. Aside from the simple point that this was the mechanism, not a set of reasons, for the extension of the franchise, most of those who did this also went far beyond the extension of the franchise to discuss the Ballot Act, changes to the distribution of seats, payment for MPs and the reform of the House of Lords; all of which were specifically excluded by the question.

Worse still was a common approach to question 2, which asked for an assessment of the importance of the poverty reports by Booth and Rowntree in influencing the passage of the Liberal reforms. Many candidates showed in their introductions that they were well aware of the focus of the question, using phrases such as, “while the reports of Booth and Rowntree were partly responsible for the Liberal social reforms, the Liberals also had other reasons for passing them”. In some cases they then listed some of these, still in the introduction. However, they then declined to discuss these further, preferring to list the Liberal reforms and evaluate how successful they were in dealing with poverty. Others simply adopted the approach of saying that Booth and Rowntree highlighted some of the causes of poverty before going on to describe the reforms with some evaluation of their success in dealing with these causes.

Another question where candidates adopted a similar approach was Later Modern History, question 14, where some turned it into the question, “Why was it so difficult to oppose the Tsarist state before 1905?”. The approach here was to focus more on the pillars of autocracy than on the weaknesses of the revolutionary movements as required by the question.

Unfortunately, those candidates who did this in question 14 often compounded their error by adopting the approach outlined above to question 2. This meant that, though in many cases they had obviously learned a fair amount of historical content, these candidates disadvantaged themselves twice, resulting in very low scores. This was very noticeable in scripts from certain centres.

Given the prevalence of these approaches across a large proportion of the candidates presented by specific centres, it appeared that candidates from these centres had not learned the skill of question analysis but had “prepared” for the examination by learning up one set answer relating to a specific angle on these topics. When that was not the angle of the question, they were incapable of adjusting their selection of evidence or their approach to address the terms of the question in the external examination.

As in 2004, some markers commented on the trend in some centres towards over-preparation in the sense that candidates in these centres appeared to be trained rather than taught. Evidence of this was seen:

- in the high proportion of candidates from a centre who selected the same questions; and
- in their formulaic responses to questions where, despite the fact that this is an unseen examination in invigilated conditions, every answer to a particular question would have the same introductory sentence or even almost exactly the same introduction (and sometimes conclusion).

While this form of preparation may help borderline candidates (assuming that the question they have prepared is actually in the paper), it discourages independent thinking and as a result may well prevent more able candidates from reaching their full potential.

Alternatively, it may be that only a limited selection from the syllabus is taught.

In terms of essay structures, some markers noted a weakness in the use of conclusions. Some candidates lose sight of the question and merely summarise what has gone before without reference to the issue. Where asked to compare the importance of various factors, in many cases the conclusion merely lists these and passes an opinion without any real attempt at evaluation or even the provision of reasons to support the opinion stated.

Paper 2

One concern that has now spread from other elements to Paper 2 is the use of prepared answers. This was noted especially in Special Topic 7 question 5 where candidates in some centres appeared to have a set answer to a question asking them to evaluate the extent to which the named sources explained the reasons for adopting the policy of appeasement. This resulted in a kind of template into which some token evidence from the sources could be inserted. As in the instance cited above, there were similarities in phrasing that suggested a whole class approach. From one centre, every candidate used exactly the same phrasing to introduce the answer to each question.

In Special Topic 7, certain issues affected different cohorts of candidates. As noted above, the requirement in question 2 to compare evidence from a visual and a literary source produced mixed responses. Though this visual source was used well by many candidates in terms of extracting relevant evidence, some did find it difficult to develop direct points of comparison with the relatively brief points in Source A.

Question 4 proved more challenging than expected. The source upon which it was based, Source D, though published at the time of the Anschluss, addressed broader issues. It also contained material required for question 5, and this meant that candidates did find it difficult to extract the relevant evidence to answer question 4, which was specifically about the Anschluss, while omitting evidence that was intended to be useful in the next question. This especially affected some candidates who scored highly on other questions.

Though, as mentioned above, some candidates offered very good answers to question 5, the slightly different angle to those in recent examinations led to some poor responses from candidates who took a simplistic view that appeasement was simply adopted as a means of avoiding war, hence was little more than political cowardice. Such a view led to very limited use of recalled knowledge and thus to relatively weak answers. The difficulty these candidates found in addressing the terms of this question may in part be due to the practice in some centres as referred to above, of preparing set answers to a limited range of potential questions.

Extended Essay

Given the quality of performance, there are few issues to raise here except the perennial one that a mercifully small group of candidates continues to disadvantage themselves by selecting questions that do not assist them in preparing and writing the essay. Once again, teachers and lecturers are urged to intervene and advise candidates who, in their opinion, have selected inappropriate questions.

There are several familiar categories into which such weak titles fall. Examples this year included:

- Titles that are not phrased as questions
 - “Reasons for the growth of nationalism in Germany.”
 - “The obstacles to Italian Unification in the first half of the nineteenth century.”
- Over-complex titles
 - “Changes in popular culture after 1850 reflect the changing pattern of society brought about by immigration, industrialisation and urbanisation.” (Also phrased as a statement, not a question.)
- Titles that encourage narrative
 - “How did the interest of enfranchisement develop for women between 1916 – 1928?”
- Titles that give insufficient direction
 - “Why did Wallace succeed and Bruce fail?”
- Double questions
 - “What factors motivated Liberal and Labour governments to pass social reforms and how successful were they in tackling poverty?”

There were also a few cases of titles that had to be penalised severely as they fell outwith the syllabus. This ought not to be happening.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Centres are congratulated on the continuing strength in presentations and steadily improving quality of candidate work in many areas. The following points are intended to focus attention on areas which may help to improve performance still further.

Paper 1

This remains the area of the examination with the greatest scope for improvement. Although further attention to essay structure, and especially conclusions that go beyond summary into evaluation, would assist in raising standards, the main issue remains that of question analysis. The single change in behaviour that would have the biggest influence in this direction would be for candidates to read the question carefully and ensure that their essays answer the question asked, not the one they would have liked to be asked.

Paper 2

Here, too, reading the question carefully to ensure that the answer addresses its terms is vitally important. It would also be helpful for candidates to make sure that they employ their recalled knowledge to comment directly on points from the source. This will give more conviction to the evaluation.

Extended Essay

Most candidates are now performing well above the level of a basic pass. Where candidates perform below their potential, this is often due to poor selection of the issue. Centres are encouraged to be pro-active in assisting candidates to avoid poorly phrased titles that may have an adverse influence on the quality of the work and to ensure that all titles fall within the syllabus.